

'Green' bandwagon will need brakes

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The dot-com era of "green" is here.

Many of us have worked diligently for years to raise green building and environmental degradation into the public spotlight. Now, that spotlight is shining bright green. It is a time of great opportunity for positive change and for realizing a return on an investment of years, or even a lifetime, of career effort.

With opportunity come the risks born of the allure of a fast buck. Like the dot-com era and the more recent residential real estate boom, there will be shortcuts taken, superficial due diligence and scams. Marketing departments are jumping on the "green economy" out of opportunity and necessity. Some are really improving their products and operations, and some are not. It is purely market forces.

We have just launched out of the bottom of the J-curve. Renewable energy has already experienced a run-up in venture capital and stock prices. As of April, product manufacturers were starting to receive spillover funding as venture capitalists broadened their view to include sustainability-oriented products.

Irrational exuberance will take hold of the market and then, in a few years, we will experience the inevitable crash. As we have seen with the speed of the residential real estate and the dot-com bubbles, investment trends are accelerating into pop-culture fads. The instantaneous flow of information and the near frictionless movement of money contribute to an investment cyclone that mirrors our microwave lifestyle.

After the crash comes the shakeout. The real advances in green and sustainability will become incorporated into our daily business processes and personal lives and much of the hubris will be left for post-mortem best-seller business books. Like Internet technologies, sustainable practices will become another necessary tool of operating a competitive business, and hopefully this integration will happen in time to save our biosphere from radical change.

So, are there ways to manage this cycle? Can we minimize the hubris, throttle down the climb, turn it into solid, lasting progress and thereby minimize the fall?

Yes. It involves knowledgeable professionals acting as the caretakers of the boom, doing their homework, demanding reality checks, calling out green-washing, and generally acting as professionals. They will be the ones that will tame the storm and survive it successfully.

Green product certifications and labels are multiplying like algae in a biofuels research

experiment. A quick scan of industry journals can reveal fifty or more green labels in a single issue. The unfortunate byproduct is that a reasonable professional with a typical work schedule in this field cannot keep up with all of the certifications and their legitimacy. A consumer in the same situation stands no chance.

One way to keep the situation from getting totally out of hand would be for the most robust certification programs to merge their efforts and create a recognizable brand image across a broad range of product categories.

This call should come from individual professionals and firms, and from professional societies and associations like the American Institute of Architects, American Society of Interior Designers and the U.S. Green Building Council.

An example might be Greenseal, Greenguard and the Forest Stewardship Council coming together to unite three strong third-party programs with different (but somewhat overlapping) product coverage under one umbrella label, and then market that label as a consumer mark like the EPA's Energy Star.

Scientific Certification Systems could turn over its standards and return to serving as purely a testing body for the new umbrella standards-setting group. The mechanics of such a move require transition phases, organizational restructurings and ego-checks, but those non-profits that would be willing to take such a plunge stand to gain enormous strength and credibility in a field that will inevitably see consolidation. The additional benefit would be to push meaningless marketing labels and weaker second-party certification programs to the sidelines, cleaning up the marketplace and clearing consumers' and professionals' heads.

So, let's all hop on for the wild ride, but let's put some of the steering systems, gas pedals and brakes in place to manage the trip and enjoy the scenery while we attempt to save it.

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